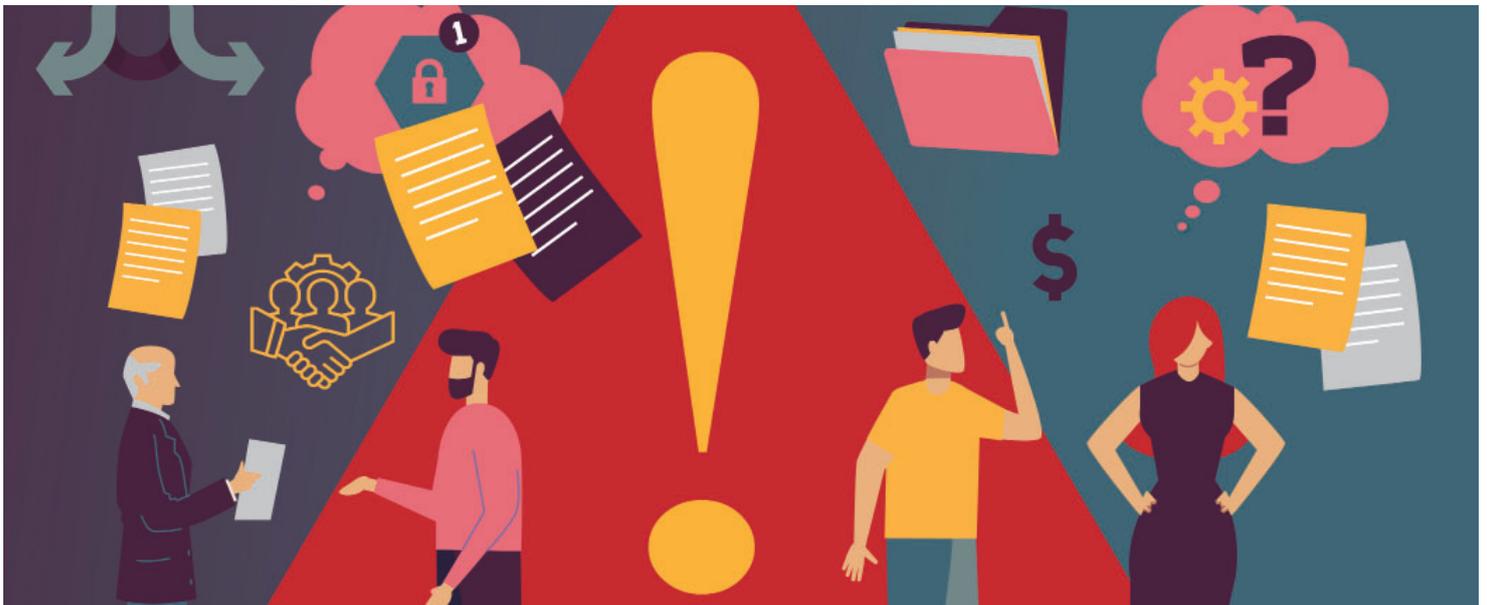


MANAGING RESISTANCE: DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE



Also read:

Intro: [Making change happen through managing resistance](#)

Part 1: [Silence isn't always golden](#)

Part 2: [Is there such a thing as too many questions?](#)

Part 3: [Breaking through a defensive barrier](#)

In Part 4 of our series on [Managing Resistance](#), Ellie Pietsch explores how effective change leaders manage one form of resistance – undermining.

Emotional intelligence and an awareness of group dynamics play a large role in anticipating resistance to change. More importantly, these skills allow you as a change leader in identifying and planning how you will address resistance and manage it effectively.

It's inevitable that you will have a team member who isn't performing well or is simply difficult to deal with in general. Boosting your emotional intelligence, even during times of organisational stability, is a powerful tool for leaders. Empathy and the ability to observe reactions objectively are two of the most lucrative facets of emotional intelligence that will help you to manage an individual who is actively undermining your change efforts.

Imagine...

You are presenting your vision for change tailored to a new audience. You stay on target with key messages, answer the team's concerns, and you leave the meeting feeling buoyed with hope.

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As you leave, you overhear a few team members joking in the tea room and one of your key team members saying: “That will never work.” He continues after another laugh: “She’ll run out of steam soon enough, just keep pretending we’re doing what she asks and wait it out.”

You think...

“How dare they! This behaviour is disrespectful and undermines my authority.” You can’t believe they could sit there, nodding to your face and laugh behind your back. Your mind is now racing: “They’re saying they’ll wait me out... as if they need to endure the change efforts rather than embracing the vision. How could they take this approach instead of raising their concerns with me?”

You may appear calm, but inside you are seething with hurt, frustration, and anger.

What’s this person’s issue? Why are they undermining your authority? Do they want your job?

Consider...

Our brains are preprogrammed to help us survive as a community. Neuroscientific studies suggest that belonging to a club or social clique isn’t something we consciously choose – our survival as a species depends on our instinct to belong to a group, enabling us to fight predators and remain safe.

Before you enter into a public confrontation to restore your authority, pause to consider the potential drivers behind this behaviour. Consider the following scenarios as they apply to your team:

- ◀ Perhaps this has more to do with the way your group bands together than undermining resistance?
- ◀ Could this be a group dynamic that is about supporting each other in times of uncertainty, which could be the indicator for you to know there is a sense of ambiguity?
- ◀ What are the core team strengths to actively harness in this situation?
- ◀ Is there a way to “enlist” the ringleader to become a supporter of the change?
- ◀ What strategies could you deploy to address their concerns and their need to “stick together”?

TACTICS

While taking a moment to consider these possibilities, it’s important to also keep in mind your team as a collective have insecurities. Remind yourself of the bigger picture – successfully driving the change initiative. At the same time, professional undermining is like a toxic gas: eventually, it will spread, so it’s important to deal with this type of resistance efficiently and decisively.

Firstly, consider the team member’s point of view. Most people undermine due to underlying insecurity and difficulties dealing with conflict head-on. Understanding what motivates and challenges the individuals on your team will give you actionable insights to deal with the behaviour.

Now it’s time to look at the situation objectively. Maybe the would-be usurper had a point. Perhaps they may be right in “challenging your authority?” They may have a better understanding than you of what needs to be done to realise your vision. If so, **take some time to evaluate the best strategy to resolve the conflict and procure them as a loyal change agent.**

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The key to managing undermining behaviour is to enlist your empathy as well as objectivity. Here are some suggested tactics for you to consider in addressing these situations:

- ◀ Approach your team member with a single goal in mind – stop the undermining talk and behaviour.
- ◀ Listen. Often, when someone is perceived as being difficult, we stop paying attention. The strongest leaders get very attentive when a team member acts out. Aim to understand the situation. Ask for your employee's feedback. You may hear about a real problem you hadn't considered, or there may be underlying issues that need addressing.
- ◀ Enlist their support. Clearly explain to the employee your vision and "why" the change is needed. Explain the negative effects that resulted from what occurred. Discuss what behaviours you need from them to support the change vision.
- ◀ Find out what motivated this specific undermining behaviour. Determine whether it is simply lack of respect or a control issue. Is the person trying to be the "clown" or the entertainer of the group? Understand what support they need, so the behaviour is not repeated.
- ◀ Arrange regular follow-ups with the employee to acknowledge positive changes and facilitate early identification of old patterns of undermining. Give continuous, real-time feedback.

In our next article we'll consider how Resistance as Avoiding may show up in your team, and some tactics that will help you address this.

If you'd like to develop your change leadership skills or find out more about managing resistance to change in your team, please contact:

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